



Ableist Metaphors And The Erasure Of Disability In Tagore's Shubha

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Abstract:

Retrieval is frequently seen as an act of confrontation or resistance that subverts and undoes the prevailing treatises of history. It also analyses the power-rooted binaries shaped by the standards that oversee the combined perception of the general public. There are some strong perceptions created by these treatises which lead to the social construct. One such perception is towards disability or disabled people in society. The portrayal of disabled characters in literature has historically been problematic and often depicted in a negative light. One common negative stereotype is the "tragic cripple" trope, where disabled characters are portrayed as pitiful and helpless, and their disabilities are seen as punishments that have given rise to the "hegemony of normalcy." Another negative portrayal is the "inspirational" or "supercrip" stereotype. In this narrative, disabled characters are depicted as extraordinary individuals who overcome their disabilities, inspiring able-bodied people in the process. While this may seem positive, it can be reductive and unrealistic, ignoring the challenges and daily realities of living with a disability. It can also place unfair expectations on disabled individuals to constantly defy their limitations. All the major domains of literary canon whether it's an epic poem, postcolonial literature, western literature, partition literature, science fiction, or modern literature, have used the concept of disability as a "prosthetic metaphor." Partition literature such as *Ice Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa, and *Clear Light of Day* by Anita Desai, and postcolonial literature such as *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie present the nation's scar and colonial legacy respectively. The science fiction, *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes presents protagonist Charlie Gordon, who is initially portrayed as intellectually disabled but his intelligence isolates him from others. This novel highlights the complexities and challenges faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities. In *Mahabharata*, Dhritarashtra is a blind character which symbolizes his evilness and greed. "Disability studies" in literature is an academic discipline that focuses on the representation and exploration of disabilities in written works. It aims to examine how disability is portrayed, understood, and interpreted in various literary texts.

Keywords: Disability, Shubha, ableist metaphors, dehumanization, patriarchal society

Ableist Language and Metaphors:

Ableist language refers to the use of language that perpetuates stereotypes, stigmas, and discrimination toward individuals with disabilities. It includes phrases, slurs, jokes, metaphors, or expressions that devalue or marginalize people with disabilities, reinforcing able-bodied privilege and superiority. The use of ableist language in books, movies, web series, etc. can contribute to the exclusion and social inequality experienced by individuals with disabilities. It reinforces negative stereotypes and strengthens the idea that disabilities are inherently bad, undesirable, or something to be ashamed of. Examples of ableist language include using derogatory terms such as "retard," "cripple," or "lame" to describe someone with a disability. It also includes using disability-related stigmas as insults, such as calling someone "blind" to imply ignorance or "crazy" to dismiss their ideas or opinions.

Ableist Metaphors in *Shubha* by Rabindranath Tagore:

Shubha is a short story by Rabindranath Tagore that presents the story of a mute girl who is rejected by the society of able-bodied and finds her companions in nature. A disabled person is kept on the margins by society but being a girl who is also disabled, *Shubha* finds herself doubly marginalized. Through *Shubha*, Tagore has explored various themes like fear, isolation, lack of opportunity, etc. faced by disabled people in the world of “normals.” *Shubha* has a speech disability which becomes the reason behind her dehumanization by society. She has a name but no identity or agency in the world which is led by the able-bodied.

Effects of Ableism on *Shubha*:

The title “*Shubha*” itself shows the ostracized nature of the society. *Shubha* was initially named *Shubhashini* which ironically means sweet words but as she was “dumb” (Tagore 2) people didn’t care enough to call her by that name and instead called her “*Shubha* for short” (Tagore 4). The third paragraph shows how the “other” people see the disabled ones with the gaze of pity and think of them as worthless or a burden on society. The weight of the people’s biased opinions had crushed *Shubha* so much that she started seeing herself as insignificant and “a divine curse on her home” (Tagore 11). She had also developed an inferiority complex which didn’t allow her to go in front of other people so she tried to “keep herself hidden” (Tagore 12). *Shubha*’s mother thinks of her as a “personal flaw” (Tagore 14) showing that the deep-rooted hatred towards disability is so firm in its nature that sometimes even mothers are ashamed of their own child. In *Shubha*’s case, as she is a girl, her mother considers her as a part of herself and because *Shubha* is lacking in some way, her mother regards this as a stigma on herself. The sixth paragraph unveils the dark nature of society depicting that people are afraid of what they hate. Children do not play with *Shubha* as they are “a little afraid of her” (Tagore 34). It shows the orthodox nature of society where people link disability with evil causes and avoid being near any disabled person as they think they might attract evil too.

In the second part of the story, the theme of eco-feminism can be seen as *Shubha* is compared with Mother Nature. The important fact is that being a human *Shubha* is not being compared to other humans but with nature because the people think that a “lack” has made *Shubha* more in common with nature and animals than with abled humans. The lines about the river, stating that it is just like a “domesticated young girl. It doesn’t flow very far” (Tagore 37) and how it is “village’s Lakshmi” (Tagore 41) show how greedy and ignorant our society is. Just like the river brings wealth to the village and asks for nothing in return, people expect women to silently provide for everyone never wanting anything in return. Just like the river, *Shubha* is also silent. She does her chores and sits by the river where “nature seems to complete her lack of words” (Tagore 48) People seek help from nature but they don’t seem to understand the rhythm of nature as it is “mute” too. In this story, defining *Shubha*’s nature, feelings, bodily changes, and companions is all done with the help of nature imagery. She is portrayed as a “dumb animal” (Tagore 137) who has no choice but to follow her master’s (her parents’) decision, however cruel it may be. Even her friends are not from the “higher species” (humans) (Tagore 79) but two cows who understand *Shubha* better than any human without words. They can sense her sorrow and they try to comfort her on her sad days making her feel acceptable and worthy of love.

A disabled woman in a patriarchal society:

The third part illustrates the gender hierarchy in our society. Pratap, *Shubha*’s only friend from the “higher species”, is a “good-for-nothing” (Tagore 83) but still, he has an advantage to his credit. “Since they are not gainfully employed, the good-for-nothings become the property of the state” and their work is to serve the state. They are even called “favorites of strangers” (Tagore 87) as they can be put to any use. He befriends *Shubha* because she is mute and “a silent companion is ideal for fishing” (Tagore 96) showing that it’s not *Shubha* which he likes but a companion who is silent while he is fishing. Pratap is worthless and unconcerned about his identity but he still has one. In that very society, *Shubha*, who does all the chores and yet “yearns to prove” (Tagore 102) herself to Pratap and be acknowledged for the fact that she can be a help in some way, is seen as a burden in the society because she is a woman who is disabled. The other important factor is marriage. Being a girl she had already lost the agency of any opinion but being mute she can’t even express her distress about the situation. The irony in this paragraph is *Shubha*, who people think is lacking in some way, can very well understand the complexity of the situation but the other people around her who considered themselves superior to any disabled people failed to notice the anxiety about *Shubha*’s face. When she is presented as a “candidate” (Tagore 168) for inspection her tears are mistaken for her good heart which can be “put to good use in the future for his benefit” (Tagore 173). Simone De Beauvoir had talked about the same thing: how women don’t get equal spaces in society.

Shubha as a girl is taken for granted and looked at as a commodity that can be used in whatever way other people want. Pratap calls Shubha as Shu which might be the abbreviation of shush symbolizing her being mute. Shubha needs to get married otherwise she would end up as a “heavy burden to bear” (Tagore 130). It shows the bogus nature of the society where a woman can put all her life into serving others but she would still be judged if she can’t secure a husband for herself. Shubha is presented as nothing more than an “animal” in front of the groom who is referred to as “god” (Tagore 166). After the inspection, the groom says, “not bad” (Tagore 170) just like a rancher who is happy to see a cattle which is going to prove useful for him. The idea of marriage is nothing but a sham in itself. Marrying her off to a random boy without telling her conditions shows that despite everything the parents were only concerned about their reputation in society or why else would they want to marry their daughter if they hesitated to accept her as she is. Her objectification prevails dominantly in the manner she is sold to the consumer (groom) without telling about the flaws of the object (Shubha’s muteness) and when she is returned by the consumer to the seller (her parents) after figuring out the flaws in it.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we have seen the major role society plays in deciding the value of a woman and a disabled person. The judgemental voice of society begins to eat the confidence of a disabled person and leave them hollow at the mercy of the able-bodied people. Surviving as a disabled woman in this society becomes twice as difficult as she would never be enough and people would always feel that they need to provide for her or they are helping her by voicing their needs or guiding their actions. Disability studies in literature provide a valuable framework for understanding and interpreting the representation of disability in literary texts. It fosters critical thinking, inclusion, and awareness, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society.

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